
Agenda for Radical History

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Agenda for Radical History

E. P. Thompson

I feel like an impostor here because for six years now my trade has been submerged in peace activity, and I have to explain to you the position I speak from now. It's been six years, not just of doing this or that every now and then for peace, but, with the exception of two short spells of teaching in this country, total, full-time activity. In five years I've addressed more than five hundred meetings, attended endless committees, visited as an emissary of the peace movement nineteen or twenty different countries. I've had in my own house a weight of correspondence which has buried any possibility of work. Much of it has been fascinating papers, letters dropping out of different parts of the world. A very curious rebirth of internationalism is taking place in a very curious way, not coming through the normal structures of political parties or institutions. Partly by accident a few names got thrown up a few years ago and became widely known—of which mine was one. People found out the address, and the letters come to me.

Some letters have to be attended to very urgently. They may come from the other side; they may come from Hungarian independents or persecuted Soviet peaceniks; they may come from the United States

The New School for Social Research, learning that all the contributors would be in New York at the same time, invited Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, Perry Anderson, and myself to take part in a public discussion on 20 October 1985. This is my contribution. My thanks are due to the New School and to Margaret C. Jacob who initiated the dialogue. The other contributions will be found in *Radical History Review*, no. 36 (1986).

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peace movement; they may come from Canada or Australia or wherever. And this has meant that I really have evacuated perforce my trade as a historian for a long time.

I don't even have a valid ticket to the British Library or the Public Record Office. As I passed the New York Public Library this morning, I felt a knife inside me—the sense of how long it was since I had been able to work among the bounty that is there. I am at least five years behind in my reading, including the reading of the work of close friends, colleagues, and former students. I'm trying to return, but there is no guarantee of certainty. This is not a position one can easily walk out of. I have to tell you that when I was attempting to get on this year with *Customs in Common*, I suddenly had to turn aside and to try and master all the weird acronymic vocabulary and technology of the Strategic Defense Initiative, and to edit and (in part) write a book on Star Wars.

But this has also involved exchanges between East and West of a very interesting and perhaps potentially very important kind. I'm not recommending others to follow my course, although one way to liberate me, if you want to do so, is for more hands to be engaging in this international work. I know some of you will be doing this. But I hope all those hands will not start writing letters to me!

I'm not apologizing. When in our country, as in yours, professional groups started forming their own antinuclear organisations, historians had a bit of a problem because, unless they were post-Hiroshima, there really wasn't very much history that historians could actually contribute (they thought) to the antinuclear movement. But at length someone came up with the right banner for Historians against Nuclear Weapons: 'Historians Demand a Continuing Supply of History'. And they're right. Because under the criticism of this shadow of nuclear war, all talk of history and culture becomes empty. Even in this city, one of the densest population centers in the world, which is now to become a home base for a nuclear-armed pirate Armada, the colleges and the faculties here have to consider their position. I'm therefore not in any mood to offer advice to future historians.

If, or as, I return to my trade, my preoccupations are rather personal: William Morris said to Burne-Jones when he was my age, 'the best way of lengthening out the rest of our days now old chap, is to finish off our old things.' And perhaps there is a sense in which three of us on this

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platform are doing that and needn't apologize for it. We are completing and enlarging work which was commenced in some cases forty or more years ago. A certain breakthrough in British radical history, associated particularly at that point with the Marxist tradition, took place some forty-five years ago. (I'm sorry to use military imagery.) We are still exploiting the terrain that was opened up with that breakthrough. For me as a school student in 1940 it came through the work of Christopher Hill: his first brief study of 1640. I sat down at the age of sixteen to write for the sixth form history society a paper on the Marxist interpretation of history and the English civil war, leafing through Christopher's work, and Bernstein, and Petagorsky, and Winstanley's pamphlets and such Leveler tracts as I could get, and some Marx, Engels, and Plekhanov. And there followed upon this other breakthroughs: one thinks of Eric's magnificent essay on 'The Tramping Artisan'. The rest of us followed through that gap.

My own 'old things', most of which are half or more than half written, include the studies of eighteenth-century social history, custom, practice, and popular culture, which I call *Customs in Common*, some of which has already been published; my half-written book on William Blake; my work on the romantics in England in the 1790s—young Wordsworth, young Coleridge, and the assertion and defeat of the cause of women's rights; and I also have a book I hope to do on an odd corner of the Balkans in World War II.

If and when I return, will it be with a different eye? I think it may. I have to say honestly, without any sense of particular criticism, or of any large theoretical statement, that I'm less and less interested in Marxism as a Theoretical System. I'm neither pro nor anti so much as bored with some of the argument that goes on. I find some of the argument a distraction from the historical problems, an impediment to completing my work. Perry Anderson and I had an argument or, rather, I had an argument with Althusser some ten years ago, and Perry, in a generous and constructive way, commented on this argument in his *Arguments in English Marxism*. I've been asked, Why didn't I reply to Perry? I feel no need to reply to Perry. I think he had many important and interesting things to say. I think we'd call it a draw. And I bequeath it to you to continue that argument, if it needs to be continued.

I will just say there were two terrible things which Perry did: he defended Walpole, and he showed insufficient respect for Jonathan Swift. Those two points I might like to argue some time, particularly because I regard *Gulliver's Travels* as the most savage indictment of the reasons of power that has ever been written. It still has a vitality of an extraordinary kind. And if, for political reasons, we try to devalue that, then somehow our categories are too limited.

There is a political problem here of a very straightforward kind. I find it difficult to say what my relationship to the Marxist tradition is

because, in Mrs Thatcher's Britain, the popular press puts down *any* form of radicalism as Marxist. If I can give one illustration. Four or five years ago I was with my daughter, and we stopped the car and went for a walk in an Oxfordshire wood. And we had our dog with us, who'd seen a pheasant. Fortunately we got the dog back on the lead when the gamekeeper came along with a gun. He said this wood was owned, not by a Lord now, but by some huge banking or investment institution, and we were trespassing and so on and so forth. As a deferential Englishman I was about to retreat. Unfortunately my daughter turned out to be a free-born Englishwoman. She started to give him quite a lot of sass about civil rights and the law of trespass. Whereupon the gamekeeper said, 'What are you then, *Marxists*?' In a situation like that, no one is going to deny they're a Marxist.

I feel happier with the term *historical materialism*. And also with the sense that ideas and values are situated in a material context, and material needs are situated in a context of norms and expectations, and one turns around this many-sided societal object of investigation. From one aspect it is a mode of production, from another a way of life. Marxism has given us a universal vocabulary, although there are some surprises that are going to come to us. A friend of mine was in the Soviet Union last year. After a historical seminar in which he was discussing questions of class struggle and class relations, he was taken aside quietly—not by 'dissidents', but by members of the Soviet historical profession, who told him, 'serious scientists no longer use the concept of class in the Soviet Union.' Insofar as an opening between East and West comes, we may find that the teeth of the children have been so much set on edge by the sour doctrinaire ideology of the Stalinist past that the discourse becomes very difficult.

I think the provisional categories of Marxism to which Perry has referred—those of class, ideology, and mode of production—are difficult but still creative concepts. But, in particular, the historical notion of the dialectic between social being and social consciousness—although it is a dialectical interrelationship which I would sometimes wish to invert—is extraordinarily powerful and important. Yet I find also in the tradition pressures towards reductionism, affording priority to 'economy' over 'culture', and a radical confusion introduced by the chance metaphor of base and superstructure. I find a lot in the Marxist tradition—there are many Marxisms now—marked by what is ultimately a capitalist definition of human need, even though it was a revolutionary upside-downing of that definition. This definition of need, in economic material terms, tends to enforce a hierarchy of causation which affords insufficient priority to other needs: the needs of identity, the needs of gender identity, the need for respect and status among working people themselves. I do indeed agree with all the speakers here upon the need to try and see history as a whole cloth, as an objective record of causally interrelated activities,

while agreeing also with Perry that the concept of cause is extraordinarily difficult, toward which we always attain to only approximate understanding.

I think the renewed emphasis upon power and power relations, especially in history, is right. Some studies of 'culture' forget the controlling context of power. And yet something that has called itself Marxism has had so little helpful to say about so many of the great problems of the twentieth century: the tenacities of nationalism, the whole problem of Nazism; the problem of Stalinism; of the Chinese cultural revolution; of the cold war today, which in my view is not acting out a conflict between modes of production or economies but is acting out a conflict from an outworn ideological script which threatens indeed to be terminal to all modes of production alike. I think we've had an insufficient vocabulary for examining the structure of power relations through symbolism, from the awe of empire or monarchy to the awe today of nuclear weapons. Our concern increasingly must be with finding the 'rationality' of social unreason. That is not throwing up one's hands and saying 'anything can happen in history', but, rather, finding the 'reasons' of social unreason. To give an example among the few articles I've had time to read recently, the one which fascinated me most of all, completely outside my field, was an article in *Past and Present* (May 1985) by Inga Clendinnen on 'The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society'.

And where, again, from the materialist vocabulary do agency, initiatives, ideas, and even love come from? This is why I'm so concerned with Blake and Blake's quarrel with the Deists and the Godwinian utilitarians. His political sympathies were with so many of their positions; and yet in the end he said there must be an affirmation, 'Thou Shalt Love'. Where does the affirmative, 'Thou Shalt Love', come from? This argument with necessitarianism continues Milton's old argument with predestinarianism and prefigures today's argument with determinisms and structuralisms which themselves are ideologically inflected products of a defeated and disillusioned age. If we can destructure the cold war, then a new age of ideas may be coming, as in the 1790s or the 1640s.

I have nothing else to say except that our radical impulses are really hemmed in in many ways. We've said little about this, but we all know it. I don't know exactly how things are in the States, but in the last ten years in Britain I feel very much a closing down of the situation. A lack of originality. A playing safe. A job situation which is so difficult that one senses a loss of vitality, a cramping of the radical initiative. And this comes partly from straight political ideological pressures.

This symposium may seem rather like an Anglo-Marxist invasion of Manhattan. I remember that there was a Collège des Hautes Études, which had the generous welcome of the New School during World War II; I wonder whether we are the forerunners of a British college in exile in refuge from Mrs Thatcher?

I don't want to tell anyone how to write history. They must find out in their own way. Those of us on the platform are as much subject to our own time's formation and determinations as any others. If our work is continued by others, it will be continued differently. What's radical in it demands some relations between the academy and active experience, whether in the forms of adult education or the kind of work which MARHO and the *Radical History Review* do here in Manhattan, and some distrust of easy assimilation by the lost society, an awareness of the institutional and ideological determinations of the societies in which we work, which are founded upon unreason, or on the reasons of power and the reasons of money.

Wollstonecraft in the 1790s said, 'mind has no sex'. I know that some contemporary feminists want to revise that position because the mind is situated very much within a gender context. But I think we want to remember Wollstonecraft's astonishing courage in saying exactly that in the 1790s. When she said, 'mind has no sex', she both demanded entry into the whole world of the mind for her gender, and she also refused any privilege for her gender. If I can use an analogy, radical history should not ask for any privilege of any kind. Radical history demands the most exacting standards of the historical discipline. Radical history must be good history. It must be as good as history can be.